WHO NEEDS JOSEPH ANYWAY?

December 17, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 35
Matthew 1:18-25

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph,..." --Matthew 1:18 (RSV)

Who Needs Joseph, Anyway? That question which, by the way, is a very important one, was posed not by a Biblical theologian or a New Testament scholar, but by a four year old child. As a matter of fact the child is Megan, Linda Loving's niece, and this story is hers. So if you ever hear Linda telling it, please don't accuse her of using my material because the reverse is actually the case. However, I am here and she is not, and this sermon does need this story to get it going.

It was a few days before Christmas and Megan, four, was drawing a picture of the nativity. When she completed her work she explained each character to her mother: shepherds and sheep, three Wisemen and camels, the stable with cows and a cat and dog and the manger and, of course, Mary and the baby. Megan's mother, Laura, noticed that someone was missing. She's a minister too, interested in Biblical faithfulness. "Where's Joseph," she asked innocently, assuming, of course, that Megan would remember and sketch him in. Perhaps Megan will be a feminist theologian someday. In any event, slightly exasperated, she shot back decisively, "Who needs Joseph, anyway?"

It is a great question. Joseph is the least active character in the story and in many ways the least interesting. His role is clouded by the mystery of his relationship to Mary's baby, in fact, his relationship to Mary. He doesn't get much attention in the Bible. He does play a role in the birth narratives: the angel of the Lord comes to him in a dream on four separate occasions. In those dreams he is told about Mary's pregnancy; later he is instructed to take Mary and child to Egypt; when Herod dies, Joseph is told in another dream to return to Judea; and finally, in a fourth dream he is guided to Nazareth. In Luke, Joseph appears briefly twelve years later when Mary and he take their young son Jesus to Jerusalem for the Passover. Then he disappears. When Jesus leaves his Nazareth home at the age of thirty, Joseph is no longer part of the story. The assumption is that he has died somewhere between Jesus' twelfth and thirteenth years.

In any event, it is impossible to be a father, to hear the Christmas story and not wonder, at least once, about what it was like for Joseph, what he was doing, what he was feeling. A friend of mine and his wife had a baby on Christmas Eve. In fact, labor started in the Christmas Eve service. Afterward, walking home early Christmas morning, he sang, "Unto us a child is born: a son is given," to anyone who would listen. New fathers do that kind of thing...!

Ann Weems has written a poem, Getting to the Front of the Stable, in which she asks:

> "Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?
> Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand,
> and told him to stand in the back of the creche,
> background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?"

And then the poet helps make Joseph a bit more human...

> "When he wasn't in the doorway,
> he was probably urging Mary to get some rest.
> gently covering her with his cloak,
> assuring her that he would watch the Child.
>
> "Actually he probably picked the Child up in
> his arms and walked him in the night,
> patting him lovingly until he closed his eyes."

We have heard the story so many times it may have lost its power to astonish us. The paradoxes, the nuances, the poignancy, the human passion all fade in the lovely pastel colors of Hallmark. All the sharp edges blur and whatever Bethlehem image we carry around mentally appears like a gorgeous Impressionist painting, but not very distinct. I never talked to anyone who wasn't shocked and offended by modern day Bethlehem - with its crass commercialism, its flagrant religious exhibitionism, its hints of violence with armed soldiers patrolling the streets. It doesn't fit the American greeting card mythology. Although every time I hear the lament from a disappointed tourist it strikes me that modern day Bethlehem is, in many ways, exactly like the little town in which Jesus was born.

How that happened has more to do with Joseph than with anybody else and I think if we take a closer look at him - bring him to the front as it were - the whole scene will come into much sharper focus.

Mary was his fiance and she was pregnant, but not by him. That's the dilemma in its simplest form. Marriage customs involved a two step process. The first step was a formal exchange of consent before witnesses. It involved a man, a young woman in her early teens, and her parents. After the exchange of consent, the couple was called betrothed - engaged is the nearest equivalent in our culture. The period of betrothal usually lasted a year. The girl stayed in her home; he did whatever he had been doing before. In some places in the Near East allowance was made for at least one occasion of intimacy, during the period of betrothal. But not in Galilee, I was assured, where the good old values were maintained. In any

event they were engaged, only more so. There was legal status and obligation in betrothal. If he died during the year she was officially a widow. If she misbehaved by seeing another man his rights were abridged.

Stage two, after the year or so of betrothal, involved bringing the bride to the bridegroom's home. There are lots of New Testament allusions to that event. Jesus told parables about the bridegroom coming to get the bride. It could be a very festive occasion, with banquets and parties which continued for days. The Bach Advent Cantata we will hear this morning is built on that motif.

Joseph and Mary were engaged to be married. And in the middle of that period of betrothal Mary becomes pregnant. Luke says she was "troubled" by this development, which has to be one of the real understatements of all time! In fact she was in very serious trouble; a teenager with an unwanted and unexpected pregnancy in a culture which deals with adultery by stoning the woman.

In Matthew's account, an angel appears to Joseph to tell him that his fiance is pregnant. Joseph "considers" the information. Kenneth Bailey, a fine New Testament and Middle East scholar, says the word could also be translated - "becomes enraged," and suggests that nobody in the ancient or modern Near East "ponders" the fact that your fiance is pregnant and you're not the father. You get pretty exercised. [The Presbyterian Outlook, December 18-25, 1989]

Joseph's dilemma and his response to it are critical. We may not agree with the customs of his culture, in fact we don't. But he thought his right - one of his most sacred rights - had been violated by this adolescent and God knows who else? Think about his humiliation. Assume that he is a mature man, as church tradition always has. Think about what he feels when his young fiance is pregnant.

In W. H. Auden's, A Christmas Oratorio, For the Time Being, the poet captures the pain and poignancy.

The awareness hits as Joseph sits in a fashionable bar having a drink...

"And I was sitting down to wait
My own true love."

Off stage the chorus says -

"Joseph, you have heard
What Mary says occurred

Yes, it may be so
Is it likely? No."

Later the chorus returns:

"Mary may be pure,
But Joseph, are you sure?"

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A third time the chorus taunts:

"Maybe, maybe not.
But, Joseph, you know what
Your world, of course, will say
About you anyway."

Finally, a tormented Joseph cries -

"How am I to know?...
All I ask is one
Important and elegant proof,
That what my love had done
Was really at your will
And that your will is love."

[Collected Poems, W. H. Auden, p. 280-282]

William Willimon wrote:

"Mary may have been blessed among women, but righteous Joseph was embarrassed among men." Many artists have tried their hand at Luke's touching account of the Annunciation - "an angel whispering to a serenely beautiful Mary." But, says Willimon, no one touches Matthew's Annunciation - "Joseph bolting upright in bed, in a cold sweat after the nightmare of being told his fiance is pregnant, and not by him, and he should marry her anyway. They won't tell you this Christmas story in Sunday School." [The Christian Century, 11/23/88]

Joseph's dilemma is deepened by the fact that he is a just man, Matthew tells us. That means he's law-abiding, righteous, a good man. The law is clear. Minimally, a divorce is necessary. Even if he chooses not to press charges which could result in her death, he must break the engagement. His only choice is to do it privately, quietly, or publicly.

Joseph is not only just, he turns out to be kind and so he elects to divorce Mary quietly. And it's then that he has this dream, or was it a nightmare, that God wants him to do something outrageous, wants him to go through with it, to do the unthinkable: as if nothing happened - to go through with step two, bring Mary, now big, really pregnant, into his home, as his wife. We don't know what Mary's parents are saying about all this - about her shameful pregnancy, her insistence that God was doing something wonderful in all this, or what her mother, Anna, was feeling the day her pregnant teenage daughter went off to live with a strange man and then, because the man's family was from Bethlehem, actually traveled with her to Bethlehem on a donkey at the time she was about to have her baby. I do know that it is no small thing, however.

What we do know is that this man, Joseph, does it: doesn't have to, in fact has every legitimate reason in the world for walking away, washing his hands of the whole mess and finding another young woman of which there were plenty. Joseph does it. He marries her. And while Matthew

says the reason he did it was because God told him to in a dream, I'll bet it wasn't terribly clear. I'll bet he really struggled with it. I'll bet he loved her. I'll bet it was finally that simple. Joseph loved Mary. Joseph loved Mary so deeply and profoundly that he found himself actually thinking the unthinkable: actually considering overlooking this obvious and public and humiliating insult to his masculine pride; actually experienced the power of love overcoming social custom, cultural mores and even his dearest religious dogma. I believe that's how God works. I believe that's what Matthew is trying to tell us with those dreams Joseph keeps having. God uses love to move people and events and the whole of human history starting with the love of this man for this woman. Joseph loved her: that's all there is to say.

You see Joseph's justice was not a cut and dried legalism. It was compassion and consideration and human kindness, and a kind of quiet but fierce siding with the outcast, the alien, the oppressed.

Joseph demonstrated a new kind of righteousness, a new morality. Moral goodness, for this remarkable man, meant more than doing the right thing. It meant loving so selflessly that he was willing to assume her shame, her humiliation, protect her by marrying her and by forever living with the doubt. Love does that kind of thing. Love overcomes a lot. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" - someone put it. [1 Cor. 13:7]

One of the things God had in mind apparently - in the coming of this child, this man into our life - was to persuade us to think differently about righteousness: to get us to let go of our tight rules and moralism and try out some exciting new concepts like forgiveness and compassion and creative love. Thus, the great theologian Paul Tillich said that "Love is Justice... and Justice is Love; not simply the application of rules to regulate private and public behavior. Justice is love at work in the world." And God's project to do that began before the child is born, with Joseph, father of Jesus.

Did he love Mary, his wife, afterward, after the child was born and after the time in Egypt when they settled in Nazareth? There is no evidence one way or the other. The Roman Catholic tradition keeps Mary's virginity intact and builds a whole system of piety on it. Joseph is a little awkward, so he remains celibate in Roman piety, quickly fades and becomes an obscure saint. Since we don't know for sure, I choose to believe they were married in every sense of the word; that he loved her passionately; that he loved his work and their family and their life together in Nazareth; that they were married for a long time, perhaps twenty-eight years.

I choose to believe that the man Jesus never forgot his father, Joseph; could recall good times together; could remember times of discovery and learning and challenge and discipline and painful self-consciousness and growth which have a way of happening between a father and a son.

I choose to believe that when one day Jesus happened on a crowd of angry religious zealots about to carry out their form of justice by stoning a woman who had committed adultery, that he remembered Joseph; remembered

what his mother Mary had told him about how it had been with her and with her betrothed when everyone was condemning her, and the neighbors were snickering and there was talk about adultery and pressing charges. I believe when Jesus picked that poor frightened woman up and said, "Daughter, your sins are forgiven," and literally saved her life, he was Joseph's son as well as God's.

When he healed a poor man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, clearly breaking a religious law, he was expressing the justice which is compassion that he learned by watching his father. And when the outcasts, the outsiders, the despised and rejected found in him a graceful welcome, or acceptance, he was expressing the righteousness which is always merciful and kind, that Joseph had lived.

While I know he lived in a patriarchal culture with only masculine metaphors for God, and I wish that weren't the case, I do believe when he astonished people by teaching that God is so personal that it is appropriate to say, "Abba," the most intimate Aramaic word for father - "Daddy" is the only English equivalent - Jesus did so somehow because of Joseph.

Who needs him? Mary needed him. Jesus needed him. The story needs him.

Let's put him in front of the stable sometimes.

Hail Mary, Blessed art thou among women, and
Hail, Joseph, Blessed art thou among us all.

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God of Justice and Love, startle us again with this simple story we have heard so many times.

May we find in it our experience: our hopes and dreams; our loves and our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.